Many of the events described in this edition of the Sundial took place in what now seems a very different world, one in which many of us gave much, if any, thought to how fragile the things we enjoy on a daily basis – seminars, meals, the simple human interactions attendant on crossing the quad – would turn out to be. We have missed all those things over the past four months, but I hope that reading about them here will act as a sustaining reminder of how much we share, and as an expression of community, belonging and hopeful purpose in a time that for many has been unfamiliar and dislocating.

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Every aspect of the world around us is a potential source of data – and now we can collect those data pretty much at will from the food we eat every day, the number of times we exercise, the things we buy, to how we feel. The rapid technological advances make it easier than ever to capture and store these data, any and all of which can and do provide insights into our own lifestyle and behaviours. Data on our lifestyle can be used in medical research; it allows us to answer questions such as how our daily activities, interactions with friends, and our environment affect our health. Businesses can also benefit from big data; a high volume of data can provide a more personalised experience for customers and maximise organisations’ profits. For example, on the web pages we browse can be tracked by the browser and used to predict which of the products may interest us. The term big data describes the huge volume and variety of data that permit the efficient analysis and mining of large-scale datasets.

Although there is much to learn from the data we have the potential to collect, our body is composed of around 30 trillion cells and 200 cell types where almost every cell has the genetic code of 20 thousand genes. The DNA code is unique to every person and provides a template to create different proteins. The proteins made in every cell depend on the tissue and organ type. These cells adopt different shapes and forms to support their function. Using different experimental techniques, we can collect various datasets describing the cells’ genetic code and the level of expressed genes. Furthermore, we can observe the behaviour of individual cells under the microscope and the different proteins can be marked to understand what each does in the cells. These different data help us understand the biology underlying cell behaviour and, for example, how this behaviour changes as a result of disease.

It goes without saying that cancer is a disease which is dangerous to life because cells start to behave abnormally. They proliferate more, live longer, and on some occasions start invading the surrounding tissues. Cancer cells tend to dominate other cells in the tissue and impact their function. Cancer becomes deadly when cancer cells colonise other organs which make the tumour difficult to resect. Changes in cancer cell behaviour can be caused by mutations where mistakes in copying DNA results in altered protein functions. One way to understand what the gene is doing in the cell is by perturbing its activity in vitro. For example, we can use methods like CRISPR to suppress the expression of a gene and identify how this can affect cell functions. We can think of proteins as the ingredients of the cells and their physical and chemical interactions give rise to the cell form and functions. An analogy is to take ingredients of a cake recipe one by one to understand each ingredient’s role in the cake.

Perturbing every single one of the 20,000 genes in a sample of cells may sound a lot but these experiments are not done on a routine basis. Using robotic microscopy, we can image thousands of isogenic samples of cells in culture dishes can have a significant impact on the observer to draw inferences about what genes are contributing to carcinogenesis. My research involves developing machine learning methods that mimic human ability in interpreting imaging but in a more systematic and objective manner. This includes identifying cells and specific features such as length, area, number of neighbouring cells, or the abundance of certain markers. These features can allow the observer to draw inferences about what genes are doing, based on the effect of their perturbations.

Interpreting large imaging data remains a big hurdle and limits what we can learn from large perturbation data. This is the challenge I set out to tackle for my Sir Henry Wellcome Fellowship. I developed KCML, an intelligent system that combines prior knowledge on genes and machine learning to discover new gene functions. Surprisingly, using KCML, I found that smell-sensing genes results in abnormal organisation of colon tissue and is associated with colon cancer. I was able to validate that the expression of these genes in colon cancer patients correlates with worse outcome. KCML can be applied to different datasets to advance our knowledge of gene functions and identify potential disease biomarkers.

Owing to the complexity of biological systems, one dataset would never provide all the clues. The abundance of big data means that we can increasingly investigate multiple datasets in order to try to explain a specific observation. For me, different types of data are like different colours: I use them to paint a story of cellular behaviour. Like art, data science requires a lot of creativity. Not far from art, I devised PhenoPlot, a first-of-its-kind visualisation method that allows drawing avatars based on measurements extracted from thousands of cancer cells in order to facilitate the understanding of microscopy data and to tell stories explaining their behaviour.

Although genetic changes are believed to be the main factor leading to cancer, they are not the only factor. Cancer can also develop due to changes in the microenvironment of cells, for example, how cells are connected and who their neighbours are. During my PhD at the Institute of Cancer Research, I discovered that the shape of the breast cells and their surrounding structures in culture dishes can have a significant impact on the activity of an oncogenic gene that can turn other genes on or off. For example, when cells are surrounded by many other cells they will have a different response to drugs than when they are spread far away. This work demonstrates the importance of studying the genetic code along with the architecture and form of cells and tissues.

To understand the impact of cell context on its behaviour, I am now working on tissue imaging data from colorectal cancer patient biopsies and resections. Imaging is like a crystal ball that we try to see through to the past and future of cancer cells. I combine methods from computer vision, statistics, and bioinformatics guided by biological knowledge to characterise how the cell surrounding and the interaction between different cell types in the tissue lead to cancer initiation. On the one hand, this can help identify potential targets for patient treatment and on the other hand, it can assist doctors in diagnosing patients. I still do not know what my next painting will look like, but I hope it will bring a brighter future to cancer patients.
Orphans of the Tide: the inspiration for has received critical acclaim. He told us about Struan Murray’s debut children’s fantasy novel.

Struan Murray
Lecturer in Biochemistry

Is there something particular about the magical qualities of Oxford that lends itself to the writing of children’s literature? I think that because of the University, Oxford does have a certain timeless feel to it, and there is something transporting about a place where time stands still which really allows the imagination to expand. Oxford is also a place where some of the most interesting and creative people in the world have come to study. I have lived here for fifteen years now, first as a student now as a full-time researcher, and I’ve been fortunate to meet so many inspirational people; they have taught me a huge amount about writing.

What books from your own childhood do you look back on with pleasure? I was a huge fan of comic books initially, mainly Tin Tin and Calvin and Hobbes. Of course, I grew up reading Roald Dahl; I especially loved Dirty Beasts for the blend of cynicism and humour. When I was a little older I read Northern Light and that was so different from anything else I’d read; it changed how I saw storytelling.

Are there any elements in your book that draw on your Corpus experience? There is definitely a bit of Oxford in my novel. The main narrative of the story is interspersed with diary entries from a scholar at the University. His story mirrors that of the novel’s protagonist, Ellie, and his research may hold the key she needs to destroy the Enemy. He is also struggling to keep a big secret hidden from his colleagues, which was inspired a little by the ‘imposter syndrome’ with which so many academics struggle. Also, he’s been battling to get a manuscript finished for a very long time.

Where do you see your future – biochemistry or writing? Both, I hope! Neither is certain because they are both dependent on continued publication success, but ideally I would like to be able to keep writing and researching if possible. I find each poses a distinct challenge, each demands a different kind of thinking, and yet they also complement one another. A lot of the self-discipline and self-motivation needed to write a novel I’d already learned in research; I think the ability to communicate ideas effectively through narrative is arguably the most essential part of academia.

Are there any plans for a follow-up to this book? Yes! The sequel is due to be released in March 2021, and we will take the principal characters from the first book to a strange and dangerous new setting. I also have a few other weird and unrefined ideas that I’m chiselling away at when I get the chance.

Book

The City was built on a sharp mountain that jutted improbably from the sea, and the sea kept trying to claim it back. That grey morning, once the tide had retreated, a whale was found on a rooftop.

When a mysterious boy washes in with the tide, the citizens believe he’s the Enemy – the god who drowned the world – come again to cause untold chaos. Only Ellie, a fearless young inventor living in a workshop crammed with curiosities, believes he’s innocent. But the Enemy can take possession of any human body and the ruthless Inquisition are determined to destroy it forever. To save the boy, Ellie must prove who he really is – even if that means revealing her own dangerous secret...

Reviews

The Times and Sunday Times Children’s Book of the Week.

‘There is a touch of Phillip Pullman about the world that Murray creates, and Murray matches Pullman’s lyrical prose in his descriptions of The City’s sea-scarred skylines and the tools that Ellie wields as she attempts to set The City’s imbalances to right. The City is singular in its character, while the characters themselves […] anchor Orphans of the Tide in an urgent, human reality.’ - Irish Times

Sarah Salter
Head of Alumni Relations

Host with the most

I first encountered Corpus at an Oxford University Reunion drinks party in New York in 2009. I was working for Hatfield College at the time and met both Tim Lankester (then President of Corpus) and Nick Thom. Later that year, a job came up in the Corpus Development Office and thinking about applying, I decided to take a look around. I was very struck by the beauty of the buildings but also by the same warm welcome that I had experienced in New York. But what clinched it was the view from the Handa Terrace. Realised that I had to apply or I would probably regret it for the rest of my life.

I started in February 2010 and was soon receiving emails from Old Members, whom I had yet to meet, enthusiastically welcoming me aboard. My first alumni event was the Hardie golf tournament, held at Huntercombe, near Henley; I know very little about golf and spent most of the day taking photos of our intrepid Corpus golfers and wondering nervously if I would ever be able to find the clubhouse again. Nevertheless, these Pelican Golf Society members who, at that point, had been friends for nearly forty years, generously welcomed me into their Corpus world, something I have appreciated ever since.

At the start, there was just Nick and me in a small office, attending every event and coping with everything from an unexpected shortage of bedrooms for a Gala (we donned Marigolds and made up 20 beds!) to discussing chair design for a fundraising scheme for the Hall renovations. With a previous career administering fine art tours, I soon found myself organising the College’s attendance at the University Reunions abroad and met Corpsies across the globe. And there was always such a warm welcome. I especially remember being invited by longstanding Corpus friends to join a terrific brunch the morning after a College dinner in New York and very convivial alumni dinners in Paris, Rome and Vienna. As well as the traditional College events such as the Eights Week Lunches, the Carol Services and of course the Vanity rugby matches, I much enjoyed devising extra events to add to the calendar, such as theatre trips to see Blanche McIntyre’s productions at Stratford and at the Globe. Hunting Bishop Fox in Durham also remains a highlight. However, the Gaudies were always the focus of the year and it is hard to exaggerate the satisfaction of seeing the pleasure and nostalgia that these events always generated.

2017 was of course an extraordinary year for the College – and for me. With the help of newly-recruited Ben Armstrong, we arranged over 50 events from reunions in Hong Kong and Singapore and seminars in Corpus to a magnificent Tudor Ball and a recital in the Sheldonian by renowned tenor, Ian Bostridge. I felt enormously honoured to be invited to the College’s 500th celebrations and also felt very lucky to be back for them. Large parts of 2015 and 2016 had been masked for me by illness but once again, I experienced the characteristic kindness of the alumni and the generous support of my colleagues for which I remain extremely grateful.

I am already missing the daily contact with the alumni and also the varied conversations over SCR lunches. Behind every College event, there is of course a network of College staff whose hard work ensured the success of our endeavours and I shall miss them too. Covid-19 meant that all College events were cancelled from 16 March and I was sent to work from home on 24 March so there was no opportunity to say goodbye to anybody in person. However, I look forward to reappearing occasionally, once we reach the new normal. Meanwhile, my retirement plans of travelling, learning the cello and expanding my knowledge of art history have been somewhat curtailed, but at least I am getting to grips with the garden.

I have been told that I will be included in invitations to future College events, so it’s au revoir Corpus friends!

I have been told that I will be included in invitations to future College events, so it’s au revoir Corpus friends!
The quiet Picture

All by ourselves
The College in Covid-19 lockdown

It was Corpuscle, Sir Henry Newbolt, who penned the famous line “There’s a deathly hush in the close tonight.” Sir Henry might have been describing the strange noiselessness that has marked Trinity term at Corpus since the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown. In the absence of fretting finalists and gregarious gardeners, with the exception of the lone duty porter, Fox the Tortoise and our indefatigable perennial visitors, Mr and Mrs Mallard, have had the place entirely to themselves.
Green college

Rather typically of Corpus, over the past year there has been a lot of quiet but determined activity to respond to the Climate Emergency and put Corpus on a less carbon intensive path in future years.

The seriousness of the changes to our climate and ecosystems and the exponential acceleration of impacts has been a call to arms for the College. Most importantly, this has been a collaborative enterprise where Junior Members, Fellows and staff have all had a role to play. In particular, Junior Members have made a critical contribution and injected a sense of rational urgency into proceedings. The College thanks all of those involved for this.

So, what have we been doing? The first phase of this project was to examine the Endowment, upon which the College relies so heavily to fulfil its charitable purpose, and to devise a policy that will move it gradually towards a much more sustainable basis in the future. In Trinity 2019, Governing Body adopted an Endowment Sustainability Policy which took a number of important steps.

Firstly, we have committed to the United Nations six Principles of Responsible Investing (PRI). Whilst we are not going to affiliate with which took a number of important steps.

Secondly, we have committed to moving the Endowment’s more in the way we manage the Endowment going forward.

Finally, we have committed to engage with the farmers and industries that do not align with our charitable purpose and mission: pornography, tobacco and the extraction of thermal coal or tar sands.

We have also decided to investigate building the new Special Collections Centre to Passivhaus standards. Passivhaus is the gold standard for sustainability and is significantly more rigorous than current government standards. While the University also has Passivhaus aspirations, in fact at the point no significant building in Oxford and certainly not one connected to a 16th century Grade I listed structure has achieved Passivhaus standards, so this would be truly ground breaking if we are able to do it. The additional cost is estimated at £500,000, or 5% of the build cost, but we believe the savings over the life of the building occasioned by the minimal requirement for active heating or cooling will at least partially offset the initial outlay (see chart below).

We expect this building to achieve a 53% reduction in CO2 emissions compared to current best practice construction which is, in my view, a remarkable statistic. We also expect the building to benefit from much tighter building controls throughout its construction; this will lead to fewer problems in the future, as buildings often suffer from mistakes made during construction which only come to light years afterwards. Passivhaus requires ongoing inspection and certification throughout construction which will, we hope, mean that we get the right first time with consequent longer term cost benefits.

In conclusion, this is very much the beginning of our sustainability journey. What has been gratifying has been the shared sense of commitment and purpose across all the College constituencies. Sustainably has often been divisive elsewhere but in our case it has been a process where all have felt able to contribute views and to feel that they had a role in shaping College policy. The result has been a series of important and meaningful decisions which will reduce the College’s impact on the environment in future years and permit us to achieve our charitable purpose in a much more sustainable manner.

Nicholas Melhuish, Estates Bursar

Sustainability

Key facts

- Replacing electrical sub mains has substantially reduced power loss across the College’s wiring system
- Passivhaus design achieves 65% reduction in annual heating energy

Film Premiere

Johnny Lyons, Director of Discovering Isaiah Berlin, writes about his film in which Henry Hardy (PPP, 1967) tells the fascinating story of how he became Isaiah Berlin’s editor. The film premiered at Corpus earlier this year.

At the start of 2017 I began to write a book which I should have written twenty years before. By October of that year I felt brave or foolish enough to email the preface of my book to Henry Hardy, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford and editor of the works of Isaiah Berlin (1909-97)—both Hardy and Berlin were undergraduates at Corpus Christi. To my amazement, Hardy responded to my email immediately, asking that I send him the rest of my typescript. And so began an unexpected friendship that reached one of its high points in Oxford earlier this year.

On the evening of 17 January, Corpus Christi held the premiere of my film Discovering Isaiah Berlin which tells the story of how Hardy became Berlin’s tireless editor and loyal friend. Their partnership, which was not without its mutual tensions and frustrations, began in the 1970s and, in a way, carries on to this day, more than twenty years after Berlin’s death. Luckily for us it has produced over twenty meticulously edited volumes, including four weighty tomes of letters. It is no exaggeration to say that in Hardy, Berlin found his very own Boswell.

The premier, which was preceded by a drinks reception generously sponsored by President, was virtually a full house in the College’s splendid auditorium. A lively panel discussion took place after the film which included Robert Coell, creator of the annual Isaiah Berlin Day in Riga, the head of the Berlin Institute for Human Rights (of which Berlin was founding President), and myself about Berlin’s life, thought and legacy. The panel eventually gave way to questions and comments from the audience which brought the event’s formal proceedings to a fittingly inclusive and interactive conclusion.

The main event coincided with the launch of my book, The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin as well as the publication of the paperback edition of Hardy’s critically acclaimed Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure. Hardy added an appendix to the new edition which includes a posthumous letter to Berlin; he had originally written it in 2004 after completing the first volume of Berlin’s letters, Flourishing.

I would like to end by quoting the final paragraph of Hardy’s note to Berlin’s shade: “We do miss you, Isaiah. It’s been more than six years, after all. But working on your letters is a marvellous analgesic: it enables me to spend much of each day in your company, so vividly do the letters bring you to life. Your Russian-Jewish-British light-hearted seriousness, intelligence and wisdom are models to us all. The other day I was rung by Angela Huth, who is editing a book of eulogies, including yours of Maurice Bowra. She has been asked, somewhat absurdly, to describe each of the contributors in not more than three words, for the book’s contents page, and wanted to know what to say about you. The best I could come up with was ‘historian of ideas’ – dull enough, but at least, I hope, not misleading. This set me thinking what I should say to you now if I too were allowed only three words. The answer flashed into my mind straightaway. Thanks for writing.”
A BILINGUAL HEBREW-LATIN TREASURE
Professor Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, Fellow of Corpus Christi College and President of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies

In a letter written on 5 July 1519, the famous humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1467-1536) praised Bishop Richard Fox and his newly founded College for its daring Humanistic curriculum. The College was hailed as a trailblazer on the path towards the knowledge of the three ancient languages of classical wisdom: Latin, of course, but also Greek and Hebrew. At the heart of this project, asserted Erasmus, was the College library and its ‘trilingual’ collections: ‘No act of his has ever proved this more clearly than his consecrating the magnificent college which he [Richard Fox] has set up at his own expense expressly to three chief languages, to humane literature, and to ancient authors. What greater service could he have rendered to his fellow men, what monument could more rightly recommend his name to the undying memory of mankind? (…) I foresee that in days to come this college, like some most holy temple shrine dedicated to all that is best in literature, will be reckoned all over the world to be one of the chief glories of Britain and that even more men will, by their own translation, be the more and more famous in this trilingual library where no good author is lacking and no bad one finds a place, as Rome in olden days attracted many by the prospect of so many marvels.’

This letter was addressed by Erasmus to the first President of the College, John Claymond, (1468-1556), whose own remarkable collection of books was to become the cornerstone of Corpus’s trilingual library. Richard Fox was himself interested in Hebrew, a scholar from Troyes in Champagne. Claymond’s gift includes some manuscripts written by Jewish scribes for Jewish readers – manuscripts which, some time after their production, came into the possession of Christian scholars, such as Rashi’s commentary in MS CCC 6 and a copy of the Earlier Prophets (the books of Josue, Judges, Samuel and Kings) in MS CCC 7. The other manuscripts contain portions of the Bible: MS CCC 5, a Pentateuch; CCC 8, the Former Prophets; CCC 9, Samuel and Chronicles; and two Psalters CCC 10 and CCC 11. It is clear these were ‘tailor-made’ for the needs of Christian readers: they are bilingual books in which the Hebrew text and its corresponding Latin translations were copied in facing columns on the same page. This layout helped Christian scholars to gain proficiency in Hebrew, by comparison with their familiar Latin versions. Indeed, these bilingual learning tools had been used by a range of medieval scholars, as attested by the profusion of notes they had scribbled in their margins (not recommended today!) these exceptional books enable us to reconstruct the thoughts and learning practices of these thirteenth-century readers, and indeed to appreciate their understanding of the Hebrew text. That said, it should be noted that no explicit information is to be found as to who precisely were the scholars who produced and studied them. No date or place of copy is mentioned on any of these manuscripts, nor do they display any medieval literary prescriptiveness: all that can be gathered from the palaeographical study of their Latin and Hebrew scripts is that they were written in England, in the thirteenth century.

We will today our attention here on the earliest and possibly most intriguing of these manuscripts, MS CCC 10: a medium size book (35.5 x 25 cm) composed of 85 parchment leaves, bound in a simple but elegant binding of mid-brown, blind-tooled calfskin on boards. Written like any Latin book from left to right, CCC 10 holds no direct indications as to the identity of its makers and early readers, but it contains a host of invaluable insights concerning Hebrew learning in the Middle Ages. The style of its Latin and Hebrew scripts suggests that it was written in the first half of the thirteenth century in England. Its English origins are further confirmed by a brief note on a blank leaf at the beginning of the volume, which explains that the Latin word alvearium can be translated as ‘a beehive’, that is ‘a beehive’ in medieval English.

The volume contains a bilingual Psalter in three parallel columns: Hebrew and two versions of Jerome’s translation of the Psalms. Jerome’s Gallican Psalter is placed on the left of every page, his Hebraica (a version of the Psalter which Jerome translated directly from Hebrew) in the middle and the Hebrew column to the right, each column written in a specially planned space marked by the architecture of the ruled lines. The Gallican and the Hebraica were written first and the Hebrew column was adjusted so that its verses correspond to their Latin translations. This was not an easy task. Hebrew texts are usually shorter than their Latin equivalents almost by half, because fewer characters are written down. In effect, only the consonants are written on the line in Hebrew, while the vowels are marked as a system of dots and lines below and above the consonants – as in the classical Tiberian vocalization tradition, followed by our manuscript. Moreover, preposition and possessive and object particles in Hebrew are directly attached to the words, without a space. The Hebrew scribe had therefore too much space available for his text. However, to make sure that the reader could match Latin and Hebrew verses, small circles were added between the columns to mark the end of the verses (Fig. 2). Moreover importantly, the Hebrew scribe laid out the text in his column in a chessboard pattern, where the blocks of text are written above blank spaces in alternating lines. While the scribe was a competent calligrapher, he did not always plan sufficiently well ahead this complicated text arrangement, and the final effect is not always successful. However, the organization of the writing space in an alternating chessboard pattern indicates the scribe’s familiarity with the layout models of Hebrew manuscripts. In the Bible, in effect, while the prose passages are usually written in regular blocks, the poetic texts follow their own page layout pattern, which has been compared in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 16b) to a bricklaying technique “a half brick upon a brick and a brick upon a half brick”. This manifest familiarity with Jewish patterns for poetic texts leads us to question the identity of the scribe of the Hebrew columns. His handwriting is well trained, using a typical Gothic style of square calligraphic script prevalent in contemporary Hebrew manuscripts. The palaeographical features suggest that the scribe was himself a Jew, or at least that he had received a Jewish scribal education in his youth. He had also an excellent knowledge of the intricate art of Hebrew vocalisation. Was this highly trained specialist in production of Hebrew Bibles a Jewish scholar who assisted a group of monks in their endeavour to learn Hebrew, or was he a convert to Christianity? The latter possibility is certainly plausible: the growing hostility of their surroundings, crushing taxation and persecutions led many Jews to conversion in the 1240s and again in the 1260s. Nevertheless, so far as the Hebrew scribe of MS CCC 10 is concerned, some of his textual practices suggest that he remained an observant Jew. This is notably indicated by his treatment of the number of the divine name. When a text containing the holy Name of God was written by mistake and had to be corrected, the scribe would cross over or erase the phrase but leave the name of God intact, adding a series of dots below the line to signal the error – as was the case at the beginning of Psalm 5 (Fig. 5). This respectful treatment of the tetragrammaton suggests that our scribe remained a pious Jew. That said, he clearly worked in close collaboration with Christian scribes. For example, he left a blank space for the initial words of the Hebrew verses, probably because they were due to be painted by a Christian illuminator, as in the alternating red and blue initials of the Latin columns. Likewise, the Hebrew scribe was working in close proximity with the Christian scribes, and no doubt in the same atelier. A confirmation of this is found in Psalm 2, where, in the middle of writing verse 6, our scribe for some reason passed the quill to a Christian apprentice, whose handwriting...
Corpus Papers
solve, some aspects of the mystery. Nevertheless, MS
needed in order to better grasp, if not to definitively
These associations are still inconclusive, such that new
monks of the East Anglian monastery of Ramsey.
on Jewish interpretations in his Latin translation.
remarkable knowledge of Hebrew and often relied
with Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175-1253), displayed a
anonymous Christian author, tentatively identified
the same approach is attested in three other bilingual
scripts, and to put them
side by side, lest, because they
their opposition through
confrontation and conflict in
their mother's womb, it may be useful to bring the
people together into the unity of faith
under the leadership of
Christ, by reconciling
their opposition through
the knowledge of different
tongues and different
scripts, and to put them
side by side, lest, because they
disagree, they should always fight".

In Michaelmas 2019, the College welcomed Marion Durand, who joined as Tutorial Fellow in Ancient Philosophy and Lecturer at St John's College. She came from the University of Toronto, where she spent seven years, first as a doctoral student and then as a lecturer in the Department of Classics and the Collaborative Program in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. She had previously studied Classics as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and she was glad to return to England and to the collegiate setting: "as an ancient philosopher, my work is by nature interdisciplinary and I am delighted to be joining a college which fosters such a sense of community and so values intellectual diversity.

As an ancient philosopher, my work is by nature interdisciplinary and I am delighted to be joining a college which fosters such a sense of community and so values intellectual diversity. Of course, Corpus is a particularly wonderful place to be an ancient philosopher, with vibrant and active research and teaching communities in both Philosophy and Classics - and a superbly well-stocked library.

Marion's research is in Stoic philosophy of language with forays into ancient logic and grammar as well as contemporary philosophy of language. Her recent work explores the Stoic theory of speech and attempts to understand the place of language in the Stoic philosophical system, including its relationship to metaphysics and the role it plays in Stoic epistemology. She is currently working towards a monograph which will provide an account of the Stoic theory based on new evidence which she has uncovered in ancient grammatical texts.

Marion teaches across the joint schools for both Corpus and St John's on topics ranging from ancient philosophy to introductory logic and philosophy of language. She is enjoying collaborating in Philosophy teaching with Mark Wrathall, as well as with Constanze Guthenke and the Classics teaching team, continuing Corpus' strong tradition in teaching all aspects of the ancient world.

Institutional News

Corpus has, in recent years, sought to address the diminishing level of financial support that is available for graduate students – particularly in the Humanities – by fundraising for scholarships. Thanks to the generosity of our Old Members a number of these are now in place.

The Mark Whitrow Memorial Scholarship was funded in memory of our much-missed Fellow in Byzantine Studies, who died in December 2017. For Daniel Altford (DPhil, History) the award carries a particular poignancy: "Mark mentored me throughout my undergraduate career, his passion for Byzantine history being what motivated me to enter the field. Daniel's work explores the ways in which the Sasanian Empire (224-651 AD) shaped the family practices of Armenia. Such study serves to shine light on arguably the most vital region for understanding the still largely enigmatic empire that lay behind it."

The Cowley Scholarships in the Humanities were established by CriS Corcoran and Kamaran Toner in honour of former President, Sir Steve Cowley. Andrew Vasco (DPhil, Law) says that he would not have been able to embark on his studies without the scholarship. "His research focuses on legal rules and how rules affect our normative practical reason. A chance remark has resulted in the creation of such beauty! We look forward to seeing the completed frontal in situ. Our very grateful thanks to all for the magnificent achievement."
The allure of the modern thriller

Alumnae Lucy Atkins (English, 1987) and Harriet Tycce (English, 1991) are both successful authors. Blood Orange is Harriet's debut novel. Lucy's latest thriller Magpie Lane, was inspired by a visit to the Corpus President's Lodgings on Merton Street. They talk about their novels and share their views on modern crime fiction.

Harriet Tycce (English, 1991)

WH Auden had something to say about crime fiction. ‘The interest in the thriller’, he declared in his essay The Guilty Vicarage, ‘is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them. The interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt.’ He explained his ‘addiction’ to detective fiction as rooted in a desire to return to an Edenic state of innocence, a form of escapism, where wrong is always set right, and the innocence of the reader is always asserted. ‘The identification of phantasy is always an attempt to avoid one’s own suffering; the identification of art is a compelled sharing in the suffering of another.’

My novel Blood Orange is a psychological thriller, which Auden would most likely not like. The first-person narration of a deeply unhappy woman does compel the reader to share in her suffering, although the ending is designed to give catharsis to this suffering. ‘It is sometimes said that detective stories are read by respectable law-abiding citizens in order to gratify in phantasy the violent or murderous wishes they dare not, or are ashamed to, translate into action. This may be true for the reader of thrillers (which I rarely enjoy).’

Fortunately for me, and other authors of psychological thrillers, a lot of readers disagree with this sentiment. And overall, crime fiction offers a lot more than simple escapism, or the fulfilment of a fantasy of revenge (however satisfying both to read and to write those fantasies might be). In my view, some of the most vibrant, diverse literature being written today is to be found within the so-called genre, exploring the most difficult and complex areas of human society. From people-trafficking and slavery to domestic abuse and child murder, the worst of human behaviour is held under the spotlight, and as in life, easy answers are rarely to be found. The reader may come for the escapism and catharsis, but given the depth and breadth of subjects tackled within crime fiction, will leave with a greater understanding of the human condition, in all its shade of grey.

Lucy Atkins (English, 1987)

Three years ago I wandered into College to show my daughter the Pelican sundial. It was the end of summer and as we passed through the Porter’s Lodge, we got chatting to a tall and friendly man, casually dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. When he introduced himself as ‘Steve, the new College President’, I assumed he was joking. In my mind, college Presidents were dour, hunched, silvery figures – Classicists, probably – and certainly never to be seen in a pair of Nikes. I’d been thinking about setting a novel in Oxford, and wondered if it might be interesting to have a College President as a character. Steve Cowley gamely agreed to be interviewed, and then he offered to show me round the President’s Lodging.

It was 27 years since I’d last set foot in the ancient pink house on Merton Street and I had a vague, mildly traumatised memory of ticking clocks and squeaking shoes,usty rooms crammed with polished furniture and grim oil paintings of men in ermine. But the house I toured that day had been transformed: the walls were soft white, the Jacobean floors polished, a beautiful abstract dominated the fireplace and the light streamed in, as if the windows had somehow been enlarged. I didn’t see Steve again – no doubt he was running scared by then – but I did spend the next three years in his house.

Whilst there, I made some alterations of my own: I added a clever nanny, a mute child and a pregnant Danish wife; I moved the priest’s hole up to a fictional attic, then moved the whole house to an imaginary alley, and created an entirely fictional College for it. And then – perhaps biting the hand that had fed me – I turned our friendly, welcoming President into a Machiavellian monster. The result, Magpie Lane, was published in April this year. The same week every bookshop in Britain closed its doors. At first, there was dismay: what would become of the novel I’d spent almost three years writing? But it soon became clear that one effect of lockdown was to be a massive surge in reading. You’d think we’d want cosy ‘uplit’, but no – it turns out that pandemic reading is dark. Sales of Cannus have skyrocketed; and writers such as Stephen King, Dean Koontz or Peter May have all reaped the benefits of having previously written ‘pandemlit’. Above all, though, it is ‘comfort’ of crime and thrillers that people are craving the most.

A good thriller is a page turner, of course, and this has obvious distraction value. But I think the appeal goes deeper than this. The act of reading a suspense novel actually mirrors, in a strange way, the daily experience of a pandemic. Both put us in a state of fear, hope and cognitive uncertainty, where we are constantly predicting what’s going to happen next. When we get new information – from the author, from the government – we recalibrate, and predict again. What’s driving this, in both cases, is a search for resolution. When we get this in a novel’s climatic scenes we also get a nice dopamine reward, and a sense of closure. Real life, of course, is rather messier.

Many writers I know are now planning lockdown novels, but a part of me wonders if I’ve already written one. I loved my time at Oxford, but my character, the disenfranchised nanny to the brutal College President, certainly does not, and so to her the fictional College is a nest of vipers, mired in the past, resisting change, hemmed in by ancient stone. The President’s Lodging, a circle within a circle within a circle, becomes a claustrophobic prison, filled with tension and lies and sinister echoes from the past. It is, in short, an irresistible setting for a literary thriller. I hope Steve will forgive me but there’s one simple lesson to be learned here: never show a writer round your house.

Merchandise

These products will be available again through our website www.ccc.ox.ac.uk/Merchandise... once the College reopens.

Did you know that we regularly send out College news and invitations to events by email? Please be sure to let us have your current email address if you want to keep in touch.